

Testimonials from 2018 FASPE Seminary Fellows

One of the most enduring snapshots I carry in my mind's eye from FASPE is the very back corner of Birkenau, near the gas chambers and "Canada" [an area where the belongings that had been confiscated from Jewish deportees were gathered]. As I sat in that corner, praying and listening to birds sing joyful songs, I was struck by the remarkable capacity of this world to hold desolation and newness of life all at once. God's own complex infinity captured in that corner of awful, beautiful earth. In my tradition, we sometimes talk about "thin spaces," places where the distance between humanity and divinity shrinks. Birkenau is, in its own complicated and painful way, a thin space.

Cate Anthony, FASPE Seminary Fellow 2018

One of the most powerful moments of the trip for me was being inside the House of the Wannsee Conference, where the so-called "Final Solution" was orchestrated in a chillingly pragmatic fashion. After visiting the site, we had an interdisciplinary session inside this house on "The Nature of Evil." There was no more powerful place to discuss evil than in the location where a great evil of the last century was planned over a meal.

Andrew J. De Silva, FASPE Seminary Fellow 2018

I distinctly remember looking at a picture of the monument erected by the former East German government at the site of the "euthanasia" center in Brandenburg (Havel), a monument that used the horrendous acts perpetrated by the Nazis in that place as a justification for the evil acts committed by the new regime. It really drove home for me the importance of relating to memory properly, a task in which many professionals must play a prominent role in order to avoid using evil merely as a justification for further evil.

Christian J. Einertson, FASPE Seminary Fellow 2018

Site visits and deep conversations with those participating in FASPE helped me to realize, that even if I think my actions are ethically moral, if not examined and challenged, I could be a participant in unjust practices.

Art Gordon, FASPE Seminary Fellow 2018

Visiting Auschwitz with a group of interfaith seminary students was an incredibly powerful experience. Although no one can ever truly process or understand the devastation of the Holocaust, this visit allowed us all to see the ways in which religious doctrine and ethical principles can be used to justify enormous evil. Clergy members under the Nazis had immense power and influence over their communities. Many often used this power to encourage hateful ideologies and actions, all in the name of their religions. FASPE has helped me to see that, as a religious leader, I have the power to make a different choice.

Deena J. Gottlieb, FASPE Seminary Fellow 2018

For me, a defining moment took place at the museum for the "euthanasia" victims. One of the wall panels showed a page out of a German kindergarten math book that asked how to "solve" the problem of handicapped members of a town given that they cost the town "x" amount of money. I had to read it a few

times to believe that such conditioning was taking place within the school system and as young as kindergarten. It made me reflect on my own education in the public school system and how my ethical framework was built from a young age. Who am I to say that my viewpoint is the right one when I probably don't know any better? That moment really helped me understand why so many Germans did what they did—not to excuse it, but to understand it.

Sondos Kholaki, FASPE Seminary Fellow 2018

I spent a lot of time this Fourth of July thinking about a William Sloane Coffin quote that faculty member Rabbi Jim Ponet repeated in one of our sessions: “Good patriots carry on a lover’s quarrel with their country.” As a prospective religious leader, I think about this quote also in relation to my professional responsibility to engage critically with my own tradition. After FASPE, I have a greater sense of urgency to engage difficult topics and ethical dilemmas with seriousness of purpose and to not assume that someone else will do it if I do not.

*The interdisciplinary session we had concerning the nature of dilemmas was also instructive for me. Dilemmas often seem intractable, but after this discussion I recalled a quote that made me rethink my own profession’s gifts and wider societal role. During my FASPE experience I began to wonder whether religious professionals might perhaps be uniquely situated to contribute most precisely during the difficult conditions that ethical dilemmas present. In *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church*, theologian Mary McClintock Fulkerson writes, “Theologies that matter arise out of dilemmas—out of situations that matter. Creative thinking originates at the scene of a wound.” Religious professionals have a responsibility to engage deeply with the issues that cut to our deepest existential concerns—and therefore in those places where we are at our most vulnerable. Yet, in so doing, there is also an opportunity to explore constructive possibilities and to create meaning where none before seemed possible. Perhaps to put it another way, in the midst of an ethical dilemma it may be important for someone to ask, where is the hope?*

Joshua Menke, FASPE Seminary Fellow 2018

Without any hesitation at all, I confirm and acknowledge that FASPE has profoundly changed my life. What I have experienced was far beyond my expectations. How we moved across different classrooms, different cities and different historical places, was incredible. In only two weeks, my life has been positively impacted by new and sincere friendships and also by a lot of academic knowledge. With the help of FASPE I am now aware of the consequences of my actions and inactions; and I am aware of the responsibility that my role as a religious leader lays upon me and also how to better face ethical dilemmas that are inherent to my position.

Guimond Pierre Louis, FASPE Seminary Fellow 2018

Both the structured and unstructured parts of the FASPE program were immensely meaningful to me. The structured visits to locations, lectures and group discussions gave life to historical events and allowed us, as a diverse group of seminarians, to consider in what ways we see modern professional ethics deteriorating and how to address that in our own roles as future religious leaders. The unstructured parts of the trip allowed for organic discussions with other Fellows—many vastly different from myself—that helped me challenge my own ethical assumptions and better understand the ethical grounding of others.

This trip has given me more practice and a greater appreciation for listening to and valuing perspectives different from my own, as difficult of a task as that may be.

Julia Wallace, FASPE Seminary Fellow 2018

On a walking tour of Berlin, the FASPE group stopped at a memorial on Rosenstrasse. Standing in the quiet, shady park on that street, we learned how Jewish men with German wives in Berlin were detained at a "collection center" on this site in February 1943, in preparation for deportation. As the women realized what was happening, they gathered on Rosenstrasse to demand their husbands' release. For weeks, these women continued to protest until the Gestapo relented and released the men. As I looked at the memorial, I thought about the courage demonstrated on that site. These women encountered injustice that they were absolutely unwilling to accept. What is that unacceptable to me?

Ariell Watson, FASPE Seminary Fellow 2018